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A Few Things About Fred Chappell

SURELY FROM AT LEAST the time I first went to teach at The University of Virginia (the fall of 1962, then), I was fully conscious of the talent and aware of the work of Fred Chappell. And I had already concluded what I still believe now—that he is one of the best writers of my generation. About which conclusion a number of things need to be said right away. Fred, of course, is seven years younger than I am; and the way that generations come and go, are announced or announce themselves, issue manifestoes and publish farewell addresses in these so-called post-modernist days, Fred may honestly and well feel that he is part of another generation. If so, fine. Still, I am stuck with the old-fashioned, more leisurely, quarter-century concept of generation, and so I can claim him for mine. It is sufficient to remark that we are both children of the Great Depression, both of us Southerners by blood and birth and choice. And there is even some particular overlapping of the sense of place; for though I am (that rare being then and now) a native of Florida, I had kin there and spent a lot of youth in the western North Carolina mountains, close and all around Fred's birthplace and stamping ground. Maybe the only significant difference between us in the experience of that seven-year gap is that I spent some of it away in the U.S. Army, killing time. It is a minor difference in kinds of experience which surfaced only during the late days of the Vietnam War when Fred was a good deal more trusting of and, shall we say, sensitive to the confessions and tales of both outgoing recruits and homecoming veterans. And about all that who knows? He may have been right and I may have been wrong. No question but that he was more open than I. It's just that I had long since lost that particular innocence. Had logged too many hours of hearing and swapping tedious stories ("war stories," we always ironically called them) with other G.I.'s not to be profoundly skeptical of a whole lot of what I heard from the next generation of soldier boys.

It is hard to believe that *It Is Time, Lord* did not appear until 1963, because by 1962 I had certainly concluded that Fred

Chappell was not only a very gifted writer, but also a famous one. This has since become a kind of joke between us: how my boss at Virginia, the inimitable Fredson Bowers, instructed me to busy myself and get famous writers to come to Virginia (as cheaply as possible) to give lectures and readings, to visit classes and to gain "visibility" for the English Department. How one of the very first ones I invited was Fred Chappell, who came up from Greensboro and did everything very professionally and wonderfully well and only told me long years later that it was, in fact, the first public reading he had ever given in his life. For me he was not only famous then, but remained so for so long, for so many unchallenged years, that his little confession could not begin to dislodge the original thorny (mis) conception. One of the reasons I simply assumed that Fred was famous came from what William Blackburn told me. In 1961, as I recall, I made a visit to Duke (it must have been my second visit there) at the invitation of Blackburn. When the true history of the literature of our age comes to be written, especially of our Southern literature, William Blackburn will have a solid place in it, more than in footnotes. For this gentle and gifted man taught some wonderful writers, helped them to begin to find their voices; among them: Mac Hyman, William Styron, Reynolds Price, James Applewhite, Anne Tyler, and many others, including Fred Chappell. Bill Blackburn was a dedicated bourbon drinker and so was I in those (o lost) days. One spring night in 1961 we sat up late at his house, drinking deep and talking about life and art and swapping "literary war stories." At some point I was just uninhibited and bold enough to ask him if he would venture an opinion as to who was the finest of all the gifted students he had taught and known.

"Fred Chappell, without any question," he replied. "Fred has the greatest gift of all of them. Of course, whether he will ever manage to *do* anything with all that talent, and whether he will ever be *recognized,* remain to be seen . . . ."

I had already read both poetry and prose by Fred Chappell in literary magazines, including the Duke *Archive,* and I was already thoroughly impressed with his talent. But from that moment, the moment Bill Blackburn named him to me as his

best student, Fred was famous. And he would be, ever after, in my book.

So from my point of view it is high time that you all got busy and produced a critical survey and an appreciation of the work of Fred Chappell. I am happy—and it seems entirely appropriate—that the *Mississippi Quarterly* is doing this.

Of course, Fred Chappell really was and is famous, in every sense of that word, in France, ever since Maurice-Edgar Coindreau's elegant translations of *It Is Time, Lord* and *Dagon.* I take some furtive pride in the fact that I was at least one of the several separate people who urged Coindreau to go and have a look at the work of Fred Chappell when Coindreau was looking for a good and gifted young Southern writer to translate.

Within certain circles, especially in the South, Fred has long been recognized as one of our best and most variously gifted literary artists. Allen Tate held Fred and his work in the highest esteem and was not in the least hesitant to say so. Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, Peter Taylor, and Reynolds Price, on the record and off, in public and in private, have been strongly supportive. Wright Morris was an early fan. And many younger writers have expressed enthusiastic appreciation. The first really significant critical piece about him was the April 1973 issue of *The Hollins Critic,* by poet and novelist R. H. W. Dillard. In the decade since then Fred Chappell has steadily gained recognition and more and more appreciative readers. By now his literary reputation is (deservedly) national. It especially pleases the ironist in me that some people, some of those people who are wheelers and dealers, players and brokers of what Robert Frost named "the literary stock exchange" are at last able to permit themselves to display a knowing nod and perhaps a little flash of the light of recognition in the eyes when Fred's name is mentioned. In fact, Fred, by dint of hard labor and unmistakable achievement alone, without any boot- or apple-polishing, politicking or hustling or swaggering self-aggrandizing, has cracked the toughest and most defensive little elite in the American literary scene—the Poetry Mafia. I am not fixing here to name any names. They are mostly Yankees and a very litigious crowd to boot. And I would hate to find myself and/or the

Mississippi Quarterly hotly pursued by lawyers and nuisance suits. Suffice it to say, then, since the undeniable and overwhelming impact of *Midquest*—brilliantly brought along, one book at a time, then all together in one volume, by L.S.U. Press—there has been a place set for Fred Chappell at the high table of American poetry.

Prose writers already know him well as one of the most interesting and intelligent (and intellectual) novelists alive. Each of the novels is different in structure, strategy, and style. All may be studied with profit by his peers. But not so many may yet know his brilliant and equally various short stories in *Moments of Light* and many magazines or in the marvelously realized memories of childhood and youth in the forthcoming *I Am One Of You Forever*. But they *should* know him as an extraordinary story writer. And I hope and expect they will. I have not even mentioned his critical pieces and reviews, as yet uncollected, which are marked by exactly the same intelligence, integrity, sensitivity, clarity, and brilliance which inform all his other work. There are not many American writers who try to do all these things these days. Some, and they are a precious few, dabble in more than one form. Fred Chappell is no dabbler. He is a genuine man-of-letters (in the Robert Penn Warren tradition) whose work is important, indeed outstanding, in whatever form he is working in and with. Moreover—and I feel certain that some of the critical pieces here are bound to indicate this truth—all of his work is closely related. The forms, themselves, are distinctly different, true to themselves and to their inherent characteristics; but the pervading sensibility and the dominant voices are clearly the same. There are only a few American writers who are really talented in more than one form or genre. And of these there are only a very, very few of whom it may truly be said that they are equally talented in all forms. Fred Chappell may well be the only one among these very, very few (he is the only one I can honestly think of) who is also the same artist in all things; that is, brief lyric or novel, each and all are clearly part of a larger whole, discrete and independent, yet none entirely complete without the others.

I leave it to the critics and scholars to do him justice in the strong hope that they will. To publishers (any publisher; for

Fred's work has been published by the whole range, from large commercial houses to small presses) I strongly suggest that somebody hurry up and bring out a selection of his critical essays and reviews.

This little piece of mine has been informal and personal. (How else could it be after these many years of admiration and valued friendship?) All of it adding up to an unequivocal statement of appreciation, not less sincere or even objective for being both personal and informal. But in that same spirit I would like to include some more personal observations. For there are aspects of Fred Chappell's character which so inform his craft and art that it is no venture in biographical fallacy to mention them. I have already stressed his integrity. Now, Fred (in the tradition of Bill Blackburn) is a gentle, tactful, empathic teacher. A superb teacher, in fact. And he brings those same qualities to friendship. But, at one and the same time, writer to writer, he is tough and ruthlessly honest, if impeccably fair, no matter what the cost or risks. Fred is not always, not by any means, right; and like every good mind, his is a swiftly changing one. But he is perfectly willing to tell you face to face what he feels about your work at any given time. He doesn't like to hurt, but as a critic he will if he has to. And he expects the same consideration. Yet his integrity goes well beyond this level. When he admires or honors something, he is also willing to say so. He will do so in public, in print. Some very-well-known writers of our generation will not ever review works by their friends for fear that their integrity and credibility might be called into doubt. One Very Prominent Writer, with a very prominent critical podium at his disposal, is reported to have said that he will review the work of personal friends only when his review must be unfavorable, that a favorable review might somehow compromise his reputation. Fred Chappell, absolutely secure in his honesty, will review the work of friends and enemies alike, fairly, and will call the shots as he sees them. Evidently he sees no essential conflict between loyalty and honesty.

(Speaking of loyalty. When Hiram Haydn founded Atheneum Publishers, Fred was one of the first writers he took on. Later, when, as a result of some corporate hanky-panky, Haydn had to

resign and move on, Fred moved on with him. Without hesitation or question. Most of the other writers recruited by Haydn stayed put, placing the security of having a distinguished publisher above any loyalty to the man who had founded that publishing house and brought them to it. One cannot blame them for the choice. But one must praise Chappell for his.)

It is not surprising, then, that pure and simple and sometimes extravagant generosity is an integral part of Fred's character. He gives and gives (sometimes foolishly) of his time and energy and of himself, to his students, to his friends and acquaintances, to others, to the (more abstract) world of American letters. I can safely say that no American writer is more active and open in his support of the little magazines, the often fly-by-night places where our literature is born and lives or dies. A complete and accurate bibliography will offer stunning evidence of the contributions Fred has made to the little magazines and, thus, to better conditions for all the rest of us.

One reason that Fred Chappell has been too long receiving the kind of recognition he earlier earned may be his modesty. Fred is a deeply modest man, though not in the usual sense of that word. In part his is a natural modesty, an animal modesty; that is to say he is as sly as he is shy. And in part his modesty comes from his honesty. Any honest writer of our times, aware of the history and traditions of modern and contemporary literature (and Fred Chappell is the best-read person I know), would have to be honestly . . . *modest*. There are and have been giants. We have lived among them. That Fred Chappell is one of the giants (and this truth is something that even he must, from time to time, suspect even if he refuses himself the full mindless pleasure of believing it outright) is to be inferred from the fact that he walks softly in the world and allows his work to speak for itself.